

# Seven New Orleans police officers indicted for post-Katrina killings

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Seven New Orleans police officers were indicted by a grand jury December 28 on charges of murder and attempted murder for shooting six unarmed refugees as they attempted to cross a bridge to dry ground following Hurricane Katrina.

The cops are also accused in three separate lawsuits of killing two and wounding four citizens in the unprovoked attack on the eastside Danziger Bridge on September 4, 2005, six days after Katrina devastated the city. One of those killed was a 40-year-old mentally disabled man; the other was a high school senior who had been separated from his family. Wounded were the mentally handicapped man's older brother, and four members of another family.

The officers were booked Tuesday in the midst of a police-sponsored rally that was widely covered by the media, where they were hailed as "heroes." In the January 2 New Orleans *Times Picayune*, local NAACP branch president Danatus King noted that the public round of applause by the police for accused murderers would almost certainly have a chilling effect on potential testimony from witnesses in the current cases and in the future.

Lawyers for the indicted officers have already filed motions aimed at overturning the charges, calling the evidence "paltry at best." Franz Zibilich, an attorney for one of the officers, told the Associated Press Thursday, "As a wise man once said, a district attorney can get a grand jury to indict a ham sandwich."

Circumstances surrounding the shootings have never been made clear, in large part because the New Orleans police force itself was responsible for collecting vital evidence and investigating the deaths. But like many other occurrences following Katrina, the events on the bridge epitomize the brutality and dehumanization inflicted on survivors by corrupt law enforcement.

In the days after the city flooded, at least 100,000 mostly poor residents were trapped without supplies or

rescue. Hundreds awaited emergency aid on rooftops and tens of thousands were crammed into the Superdome sports arena in sweltering, filthy conditions. After nearly a week without help, thousands of city residents set out on their own in search of potable water, food, and missing loved ones.

The cases against NOPD officers assert that on the morning of the incident, families making their way over the bridge in search of relief and missing relatives came under gunfire from heavily armed men.

According to papers filed with the court, most of the shooters were out-of-uniform members of the New Orleans police department, who had suddenly arrived at the bridge in a commandeered rental truck and immediately began firing on the families. Killed were two men who attempted to flee, and four others were seriously wounded.

Ronald Madison, a 40-year-old mentally disabled man, died of seven gunshot wounds to the back. He and his brother, Lance Madison, 49, were crossing the bridge to escape the floodwaters. Like masses of others, the two had been stranded on the roof of an apartment building awaiting rescue for several days before deciding to brave the submerged streets.

As they reached the middle of the Danziger Bridge, according to Lance Madison, the brothers were shot at. When they began running, one of the officers shot Ronald in the shoulder. Lance, also wounded, moved his brother to a motel parking lot, where he was arrested.

The police claimed that both brothers were threatening them, and that Ronald Madison, described only as an "unidentified gunman," ran to the end of the bridge toward a motel, "reached into his waist [sic] and turned toward the officer who fired one shot fatally wounding him." Lance Madison was held for six months before being released without an indictment against him.

Another family was attacked at the base of the bridge.

Leonard and Susan Bartholomew; their teenage son and daughter; their nephew, Jose Holmes; and his teenage friend, James Brissette were all crossing the bridge together in search of supplies. Brissette, a 19-year-old high school senior from the Ninth Ward searching for his mother with the Bartholomews, was shot and killed.

In a September 13, 2006, interview on National Public Radio, Susan Bartholomew described that officers opened fire without warning, hitting five of the six members of her group. “When I look,” she recounted, “we’re all on the ground and all you can see is blood. Everywhere. You can hear everybody hollering, moaning, everybody been shot and in pain.... My right arm was on the ground lying next to me. The only thing that was attached to it was a piece of skin. It had been shot off.”

After the gunfire, Bartholomew said that cops in shirts emblazoned with the letters “NOPD” surrounded them, pointing weapons at them and telling them not to look up. Nineteen-year-old Jose Holmes, who had been hit twice and whose right arm was shattered, hid behind a cement slab in a walkway alongside the bridge. An officer approached him, he told NPR, then, “He leaned over the cement block, he put the rifle to my stomach and shot me twice.”

An internal police department investigation summarily cleared all the indicted officers of wrongdoing, concluding that the officers acted in self-defense. The police version of events, however, is rife with errors and unsubstantiated claims.

Initially, for example, the NOPD stated that officers were responding to a call from repair contractors who being fired upon by snipers. The official police report, issued a month afterward, claimed the police were responding instead to an emergency report that two fellow officers were “down” from gunfire under the bridge.

The incident was further characterized by the NOPD as the attempted murders of a St. Landry Parish deputy sheriff and seven other New Orleans officers. But the deputy sheriff was later revealed to be a former police officer with a criminal record participating in the shooting while posing as a deputy.

As with most developments following the hurricane, New Orleans residents killed and wounded on the bridge were vilified by officials and the media. Dozens of officers, meanwhile, engaged in car theft, organized looting rings, and numerous fatal shootings.

Elements within the NOPD responsible for its decades-long reputation of corruption, vigilantism, and thuggery were emboldened by the Bush administration’s handling

of the disaster and justified by demonization of the hurricane victims in media coverage.

In the aftermath of the hurricane, police and other security personnel carried out several other high-profile attacks on black residents. On October 8, 2005, three city cops and at least one federal agent were caught on video brutally beating a 64-year-old retired schoolteacher (see “Videotaped police beating in New Orleans”). On December 27, half a dozen New Orleans police pepper-sprayed and shot to death a mentally disturbed man who was brandishing a small knife (see “New Orleans police gun down mentally ill man”).

The impunity with which many of these crimes were perpetrated in the midst of unprecedented catastrophe embodied the savagery of the ruling establishment toward the working class and extreme social polarization coloring its response.

That it has taken a year and a half to reach arraignment is indicative of the state of the city’s social infrastructure and reconstruction—a process government officials, including President Bush, declare could take a quarter century.

Sixteen months after Katrina, much of New Orleans remains in utter shambles. Less than half of the population has returned, and in the working class neighborhoods of Orleans and St. Bernard Parishes, most seriously damaged homes remain standing without repair or demolition.

The \$7.5 billion Road Home federal rebuilding fund has thus far distributed aid to a mere 97 homeowners out of the 90,000 who have applied. Of the 77,000 low-income homeowner applications for the \$10.4 billion Community Development Block Grant, only a few dozen have received aid.

Hundreds of thousands of Gulf Coast residents remain displaced; a quarter million are living precariously in Texas, most dependent on inadequate federal aid and state social services. Another 100,000 remain in Georgia. More than 80,000 families in Louisiana are crowded into FEMA trailers. Most of the displaced are destitute and overwhelmingly black residents of New Orleans who were unable to evacuate on their own before the hurricane’s impact.



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